

Poletown Historic District
Fischer Body Company Plant Number Twelve
1961 East Milwaukee Ave.
Detroit
Wayne
MI

HABS No. MI-275-12

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON DC, 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING RECORD

POLETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

HABS No. MI-275-12

Fisher Body Company Plant Number Twelve

(Also known as J. Lee Hackett Company and several other names)

Location:	1961 East Milwaukee Avenue Detroit, Michigan UTM: 17.330486.4693342 Quad: Highland Park
Date of Construction:	1904--ca. 1920
Present Owner:	City of Detroit, Department of Community & Economic Development 150 Michigan Avenue Detroit, Michigan 48226
Present Use:	None
Significance:	It served as a manufacturing plant for several early auto- mobile companies, as well as for the Fisher Body Company.
Historian:	Charles K. Hyde, April 1981

This brick factory has served as the home for a half dozen firms, with most of them related to Detroit's automobile industry. Because its earliest roots are distant and obscure, the buildings are usually associated with either the Fisher Body Corporation, which occupied the plant from 1916 until 1942, or the J. Lee Hackett Company, which used it from 1942 until 1973 and left a large sign on the roof. It is a good example of the numerous relatively small plants built in the Milwaukee Junction industrial district of Detroit during the period 1900-1920.

The firm of Meier & Schuknecht, manufacturers of trunks and valises, is shown at this location in the Detroit City Directory for 1904, the first listing for this site. In 1906-1909, "Jacob F. Meier Co., Trunk Manufacturers," is listed as the occupant.¹ The Metzger Motor Car Company bought the plant from Meier and remained there from 1910 through 1913. William F. Metzger, B.F. Everitt, and William Kelly launched this firm in 1907 with a capitalization of \$500,000. This was one of several car companies that "Billy" Metzger helped organize during the early years of the Detroit automobile industry. These include the Cadillac Motor Car Company, the Northern Motor Car Company, the Columbia Motor Company, the Wayne Automobile Company, and the Everitt-Metzger-Flanders (E-M-F) Company.² He and his partners sold the Metzger Motor Car Company to the Maxwell Motor Car Company in 1913 and Maxwell occupied the plant until 1916, when the Fisher Closed Body Company bought it. Maxwell continued to operate several large plants in Detroit and the firm later became one cornerstone of the Chrysler Corporation.³

The Fisher Body Company, incorporated in 1908, the Fisher Closed Body Company (1910), and several related firms were consolidated in August 1916 as the Fisher Body Corporation. By then, the firm was the largest of many independent companies which supplied automobile bodies to the major manufacturers. It had a total of thirty-two plants with a combined space of 5.5 million square

feet, with twenty-five plants (4.5 million square feet) in Detroit, mostly in an area east of Woodward Avenue and south of the Grand Boulevard. The firm supplied bodies for the Ford, Hudson, Essex, Studebaker, Cadillac, Buick, and Chandler cars during the 1910s. After Fisher Body became a subsidiary of the General Motors Corporation in November, 1919, it produced all the bodies used by the various divisions of the parent firm.⁴ The Milwaukee Avenue factory became Plant Number Twelve in Fisher Body's Detroit manufacturing complex. There is little physical evidence showing how the building was used during the Fisher era, except for several paint booths on the fourth floor. The building's relatively small size suggests that it was probably used to produce body trim and perhaps small body parts, which were then shipped to Fisher Body's larger plants nearby. Fisher probably did not use the building during the mid-1930s, for it did not appear in the Detroit City Directory for 1937. As late as 1941, the J. Lee Hackett Company, manufacturers of precision machinery, was still on Commonwealth Avenue in Detroit, but it had the boilers at the Milwaukee Avenue plant inspected in May 1942, presumably in the course of moving in.⁵ Hackett remained there until 1973, and the building was subsequently used for warehousing until it was razed in 1981.

The plant consists of one major building and two small additions. There is a four-story rectangular building, 60 feet wide and 540 feet long, running east and west, with two exterior stair towers and two exterior elevator shafts on the south facade. The eastern stair tower supported a water tank for the sprinkler system, but the tank was not extant in 1981. The building is of standard mill construction, with exterior brick bearing walls, wooden floors, steel sash, and an interior support system of timber columns and beams. There are three rows of columns on each of the first three floors, but only one on the fourth floor, where wooden columns support steel beams, which in turn support the roof, which has three major sections, each pitched

towards a drain in its center. In addition, there is a single-story steel-framed building, measuring 60 feet by 80 feet, attached to the center of the main building's south facade. Finally, there is a small attached brick boilerhouse at the southwest corner of the main building, with a large brick smokestack. The boilerhouse contains two vintage units -- a 1911 Titusville Ironworks Company boiler and one built by the Wickes Boiler Company in 1919.⁶

NOTES

¹Polk's Detroit City Directory, 1900-1910, passim. The street address was given as 531-563 East Milwaukee Avenue until 1922, when Detroit's street numbers were changed. From 1922 to the present, 1961 East Milwaukee is the address for this factory.

²"Detroit, The Automobile City," Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal, XIV (December 1, 1909), pp. 136-137 and "The Rapid Growth of the Metzger Idea," Michigan Manufacturer and Financial Record, VI (January 14, 1910), p. 40.

³Polk's Detroit City Directory, 1910-1916, passim; Clarence M. Burton, History of Wayne County, III (Detroit, 1930), p. 158; and Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922, I (Detroit, 1922), pp. 583-584.

⁴Burton, The City of Detroit, I, p. 597.

⁵Polk's Detroit City Directory, 1937 and 1941; City of Detroit, Department of Buildings and Safety Engineering, Certificate of Steam Boiler Inspection, May 12, 1941.

⁶Miscellaneous Certificates of Steam Boiler Inspection found on the premises.